

Lady D's survivors rely on faith, work

As the NTSB readies its report, those who endured the 2004 water taxi sinking have found their own answers to the tragedy

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HARRISONBURG, VA. // Two years and a day after the water taxi Lady D flipped over in the frigid waters of Baltimore Harbor, the National Transportation Safety Board will meet in Washington on Tuesday to provide some long-awaited answers about what happened and why.

But here in the Shenandoah Valley, Dr. George Bentrem expresses only the mildest interest in the NTSB's findings about an accident that took the life of his son and left one of his daughters with severe brain damage.

"We're not looking for the answers in that report," he says. "I'm just going to leave that up to the NTSB."

Bentrem and his wife, Elizabeth, say they have found the answers they need in the Bible -- in verses such as the one from 2 Corinthians that assures them that "our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

Their troubles would seem neither light nor momentary to most people.

While coming to terms with their loss of 6-year-old Daniel, the Bentrems have had to provide round-the-clock care for 10-year-old Sarah, who reclined immobile and voiceless through an interview with her parents and 9-year-old sister last week.

There is no guarantee that Sarah will ever get better, but her family clings to a hope as strong as their Christian faith.

The Bentrems, like the survivors of three other victims of the Lady D accident, agreed to talk with The Sun about how they have dealt with their grief in the two years since a sudden squall blew in from the west and caught the pontoon boat on its run from Fort McHenry to **Fells Point** on March 6, 2004. Five of the 25 occupants of the heavily loaded craft were killed.

Tom Pierce of Vineland, N.J., lost his wife of 37 1/2 years, Jo Ann, 60, and his 34-year-old daughter, Lisa.

Denny and Karen Schillings of Homewood, Ill., lost their 26-year-old daughter, Corinne.

Edward and Eileen Roccella of Vienna, Va., lost their 26-year-old son, Andrew, who had just bought an engagement ring to present to Corinne Schillings. He was their only child.

The Roccellas declined through their lawyer to be interviewed for this article, but the Bentrems, the Schillingses and Pierce all say they have rebounded and moved on with their lives.

For all, the formula for recovery has involved faith, love and work -- but for each in different measures.

Tom Pierce has written a book about the power of love. The Schillings family has set up a foundation in Corinne's name to provide scholarships for young women who want to study abroad.

And the Bentrems have immersed themselves in their faith and their "church family" while attending to Sarah's every need and forming a "tag team" to attend sister Katy's soccer games.

None of the family members interviewed expressed anger or bitterness over the accident, which has raised serious questions about the handling of the boat, the management of the water taxi company and the regulatory diligence of the Coast Guard.

The tragedy gripped Baltimore for more than a week as divers struggled to recover three bodies that were swept away in the cold currents of the murky harbor. There was something about the accident -- coming without warning during an activity perceived as virtually risk-free -- that attracted national attention. It was a stark reminder that Baltimore Harbor is not an ornamental pond but an arm of the **Chesapeake Bay** that demands a mariner's respect.

The toll would have been much greater if not for a rescue effort by Navy reservists and Baltimore firefighters -- some of whom jumped into the icy water to drag passengers to safety.

Mike Homan, who served as mate on the Lady D the day of the accident, says he believes he was the last of the survivors to be pulled from the boat -- which had overturned and trapped him -- without permanent injury. He says he has gotten on with his life and doesn't have nightmares about the accident, though he doesn't go out on the water anymore.

"To me it's too much risk for the amount of money they pay. It kind of took the fun out of it," he says.

Homan, who lives less than two blocks from the water in **Fells Point**, remains grateful to the rescuers. He says he sees them around town sometimes and believes that some of them are finding it harder to come to terms with what happened than the people they saved.

His observation is true for firefighter Robert Sebeck and Navy Reserve Cmdr. Petersen Decker, who were briefly hospitalized after diving into the water to rescue the Lady D's passengers and crew.

Sebeck, a 25-year Fire Department veteran who helped pull Sarah Bentrem from the water, says he's haunted by the sight of her curly hair blowing in the wind.

"That image will never leave me," says Sebeck, 45. "It'll never be over. You don't see stuff like that and wake up in the morning and everything's hunky-dory."

Decker, 53, says there hasn't been a day since when he hasn't thought of the incident -- even while serving a 14-month tour of duty in Iraq and Kuwait. He says he still hears the screams and remembers "the blackness of the water."

He still sees the face of Lisa Pierce with water pouring from her.

"I feel a great sadness for the loss of five people. I think of a little boy and his family," he says. "I tried to revive Mr. Pierce's daughter, and I often ask what else should I have done."

Told of the rescuers' second-guessing, George Bentrem replies as he often does -- with a biblical verse. It is Romans 8:28:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Bentrem says the rescuers need to accept what has happened and go on.

He says he believes that what happened in Baltimore two years ago unfolded like "a script that was written long ago."

"There's no use beating yourself up about it or ruminating on it," he says.

Sarah Bentrem half sits, half lies in her wheelchair in the Bentrem's living room. It's a modest home in a subdivision just outside the university town of Harrisonburg, a three-hour drive from Baltimore.

Her big brown eyes stare off into some faraway place. Her hands are rigid, with index fingers pointed and the others curled. Her feet are bent inward. She's thin but not emaciated, and her long brown hair hangs down behind her chair.

She's dressed in pajamas of bright pink -- her favorite color.

George Bentrem, a 41-year-old family practice physician, says Sarah is in what is known as a "low response state." On a scale in which a 1 is a coma and 8 is full consciousness and mobility, she would rank a 2 or a 3, he says.

Sarah brushed about as close to death as a person can without perishing.

Doctors say they believe that she was in the icy water about 10 minutes and that she spent another 10 minutes without breathing on her way to the hospital. Her father says her temperature was about 80 degrees when the medical team shocked her heart into beating again.

Bentrem says a lot of people in a low response state never recover, but he and his wife pray and hope and see signs of improvement.

"She's very bright in the eyes. You just get the sense any day she's going to spring right out of there," he says.

Bentrem says an MRI of Sarah's brain shows that the portion controlling thinking is intact. It's the part that controls movement that was grievously injured by a lack of oxygen.

Liz Bentrem, 37, says she's sure that Sarah is aware of being surrounded by a loving family. She talks to her constantly and reads her Bible verses. She holds her on the couch for hours each day.

"When I hold her in my arms, she just relaxes," Liz says.

Several times during an interview of about 90 minutes, Sarah begins to gasp and choke. There's no panic. The Bentrems swing into action with poise and precision born of repetition. Liz removes a tube from its package and passes it to her husband, who inserts it into the hole in Sarah's windpipe.

"Loud noise, Sarah," George warns his daughter before turning on the machine that suctions fluids from her breathing passages. When they finish, conversation resumes as if nothing had happened.

The Bentrems say Sarah has a day nurse for 40 hours a week and a night nurse for 50 hours. Mother and father split the remaining 78.

"It's like two full-time jobs," says George, who works three-quarters of his former schedule at his medical practice.

The Bentrems say they believe firmly that Sarah is absorbing what goes on around her. They bring in a teacher to read her lessons so she can keep up with her fellow fifth-graders.

While she cannot speak, they say she communicates with them in writing when they put a pencil in her hand and hold it to paper.

George shows a visitor some of Sarah's scrawls. Here and there, among the random squiggles, are some that can be interpreted as a "yes" or a "no."

At times, her usually unfocused eyes fix intently on someone who speaks to her.

Money is not a problem, George says. Like Homan and their fellow passengers, the Bentrems reached an out-of-court settlement with Living Classrooms Foundation, the Baltimore nonprofit that owned the company operating the Lady D. Terms of the settlement remain undisclosed.

The Bentrems receive constant support from fellow members of their Assembly of God church, and their pastor, Jeff Ferguson, stops by regularly to see Sarah.

The Bentrems say one of the Bible verses that comforts them is Philippians 1:21:

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Liz says she believes what Daniel has gained is eternal life. Deeply religious before the accident, she says Daniel's death has changed her by focusing her attention even more on heaven.

Katy, who at age 7 was the youngest survivor of the Lady D, says she's happy her little brother is in heaven. "But I'm also sad because I miss him," she says.

George Bentrem says it has taken a couple of years for the family to come to grips with what he called a "forest fire" of the soul.

Even so, he says, "there are days when it's tough to deal with it. I really don't understand how people go through these things without God."

Tom Pierce says he doesn't feel he's going through life without Jo Ann or Lisa. He says he feels the presence of his wife and daughter every day.

"It's so obvious that they are still with me and helping me through things," he says.

Pierce, 62, says he believes that both his wife and daughter anticipated that their deaths were near. He says the accident was somehow "supposed to happen."

More than most of the survivors, Pierce has made an effort to stay in touch with the rescuers and fellow Lady D passengers -- surprising many of them with his cheerfulness and positive outlook.

Last year he came to Baltimore for the first anniversary of the capsizing and ended up having a five-hour dinner with Sebeck, the firefighter who participated in the rescue. He says he's thinking of returning to Fort McHenry tomorrow.

For a year after the accident, Pierce poured his energies into writing a book he called *The Last Rose: A True Celebration of Eternal Life*. He says it's not about the accident but about "the power of love" -- a man for his wife, a father for his daughter and two women for mankind.

The book's name, he says, is a reference to his practice over 37 1/2 years of marriage of presenting Jo Ann with a rose on the 13th of each month to commemorate the anniversary of their marriage Aug. 13, 1966. He says he hopes to send copies of the self-published, 90-page volume to each of his fellow survivors.

Pierce, a computer consultant, says he owns a half-interest in a restaurant near his home in Vineland. He recently bought a second building in Richland Village, N.J., where he plans to open another restaurant. He will call it *The Legacy* and hang portraits of Jo Ann and Lisa there.

Pierce says the experience of loss and recovery has made him stronger.

"It hasn't been difficult. It hasn't been great, it hasn't been fun, but on the other hand it has," he says.

For Denny and Karen Schillings, perhaps the hardest thing to understand is why they lived and

their daughter and the man she loved died. He was a strong swimmer. She was very fit. The elder Schillingses were in their mid-50s.

"You would not expect us old folks to have survived. There's no logic to that," Denny Schillings says.

Corinne Schillings and Andrew Roccella were both 26 and graduates of Purdue University. Yet they had to go halfway around the world to meet as students abroad in Italy.

They were both working in Washington when her parents came east to visit, and they all decided to spend a Saturday afternoon in Baltimore with Roccella's mother and father.

Relatives say that had Andrew and Corinne made it through the weekend, they almost certainly would have become engaged. Instead, when the wind and waves struck the Lady D, they would disappear into the depths of the Patapsco River, and their bodies would be found more than a week later.

For Corinne's parents, healing has come in the form of work -- and a labor of love.

Karen Schillings, 57, says she returned to her job teaching first- and second-grade art two weeks after the funeral. People worried that it was too soon, she recalls, but she found it helpful.

"I found that as long as I was with the kids, I felt that I had purpose," she says. Had she not resumed her life, Karen says, "Corinne would be very upset with me."

The Schillingses also established the Corinne Jeannine Schillings Foundation, providing scholarships to award-winning Girl Scouts who want to study foreign languages and grants for college-level study abroad. To her parents, it is an appropriate tribute to a young woman who loved to travel and spoke four European languages.

Denny says the inspiration for the foundation came to Karen when she was still in intensive care at Johns Hopkins Hospital for a life-threatening heart condition -- "broken heart syndrome" -- brought on by the stress of the accident.

Known to physicians as stress cardiomyopathy, it mimics the symptoms of a heart attack by stunning part of the heart muscle. But patients who survive typically recover quickly, as Karen did, and Denny says that "we will always be indebted" to the Hopkins staff.

But while the foundation was Karen's idea, it might have been Denny's salvation.

Karen says her husband threw himself into the project, spending many hours developing a Web site (www.cjsfoundation.org) and establishing criteria for the awards.

"It was truly cathartic for us," Denny says.

The Roccellas have established a similar foreign study scholarship in Andrew's name at Purdue. Liza Boffen-Yardanov, director of development for international programs at the Lafayette, Ind., university, said three scholarships have been awarded, with more to come in about two weeks.

The Schillingses say their foundation has given out seven \$1,500 scholarships and five study awards. They take an active role in screening the recipients and say they are "amazed" by the quality of the applicants.

Now they look forward to the marriage of their daughter Denise, 31.

While the Bentrems are focused intensely on the spiritual side of their experience, the Schillingses have taken a strong interest in the public policy implications.

From their Illinois home, they have tried to follow the NTSB investigation and are intensely interested in the findings. They have written to the agency's acting chairman and to members of Congress to express their concerns about small-craft safety.

"Little Sarah might not have had the brain damage she had if she had a life jacket," Denny says.

But Homan, the former mate, says that in his case, wearing a life vest might have been fatal -- trapping him under the boat while he was knocked out. On the brink of drowning, he was rescued by fellow passengers -- Puerto Rican National Guardsmen -- and brought back with CPR.

Homan, 57, says the experience left him with no fear of "dying again."

"I have to say it, it was painless. The pain was being brought back to life."

Water taxi accident

What happened: On a March 6, 2004, trip from Fort McHenry to **Fells Point**, the Lady D water taxi overturned during a sudden squall. Twenty-three passengers and two crew members were thrown into the Baltimore harbor. Five passengers were killed.

Legal action: Federal lawsuits were filed on behalf of everyone on the boat except the captain against Living Classrooms Foundation, the nonprofit that operated the water taxi service. A confidential settlement was reached in October 2004. Insurance firms representing Living Classrooms filed a lawsuit Feb. 17, 2006, against the Coast Guard, alleging the boat was improperly certified.

Investigation: The National Transportation Safety Board has spent two years investigating the accident. In December 2004, the NTSB reported the Lady D was carrying 700 pounds of excess weight -- noting that the Coast Guard had used 1960s-era average population weights in setting capacity limits. NTSB simulation studies released in October showed that the water taxi was too unstable and heavy to withstand the wind and waves in the harbor.

What's next: On Tuesday, the NTSB is scheduled to consider the final report of its investigation into the accident. It is expected to cover such topics as the Coast Guard's certification procedures, the seaworthiness of the water taxi and the response of the captain to the weather conditions.

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